

## Experiences of An Island School Teacher

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Just fresh out of County Normal at Charlevoix and looking for a job, I heard about a vacancy on South Manitou Island. I applied for the job and, happily, was accepted. There was another attraction ... my boyfriend Lonzo Warner was a Coast Guardsman at the Island Station at the time.

This was at the time of the Great Depression of the 1930's, when any employment was appreciated. I remember a note written to me by a fellow student at County Normal that said, "Good luck next year, and may the wages rise!" The wages were \$50.00 a month, with \$20.00 of that going for room and board. I boarded with Lonzo's parents, August and Rosie Warner, who lived on the point just between the Coast Guard station and the Lookout.

In those days, being the teacher of a rural school meant one was also the Principal, the school nurse and custodian. One day in the fall of my first year as South Manitou's teacher, one of the boys got a pine needle stuck in his eye while playing out at recess time. I had to play the part of nurse for the first time, and removed the needle without further injury to his eye.

Besides teaching and nursing, there were the added duties of pumping water for the drinking fountain, splitting wood, building fires during the cold weather months, and sweeping and dusting after the students went home for the day. In cold weather, I would go to school early to get the fire started so the room would be warm when the students arrived. On one such morning, still all alone in the cold and dark schoolhouse's classroom, I opened the stove door to begin the chore of building the fire, then went to the wastebasket for paper to kindle the fire. When I reached in, something leapt out and scared me out of my wits! I jumped onto the recitation bench and screamed! How silly, I thought, after thinking about it. It had to be an animal of some sort. It was too big for a mouse. What on earth could it be?

Regaining my composure and going to my desk, I discovered how the culprit got into the building. There was broken plaster all over the desktop and the floor surrounding the desk. Looking up, I spotted the hole in the ceiling. Two of the older boys soon arrived, and after briefing them about the incident, we began the search for the intruder. He was found in one of the desks, looking very scared indeed ... probably from my insane screeching (which was by no means revealed to the boys!) It was only a poor little squirrel, who was no doubt having a morning breakfast on leftover apple cores from the day before.

That wasn't my only scary incident that first year on South Manitou. My walk to school each morning was about 1-1/2 miles by the main road, but I soon learned about a short-cut through the woods, which led to an open field, then across the field to the school house. This was a fine route, until one morning on approaching the field, I stopped dead in my tracks!



There before me in the pre-dawn shadows was a whole herd of black cattle, which all seemed to be glaring back at me, as if ready to charge. I turned quickly and ran back through the woods as fast as I could go, back to the safety of the main road. That evening, when I told Rosie about my experience with these beasts, she said with a smile, "Oh, they are harmless! Just take a switch and swish it at them and they'll go the other way." I took this advice the next time I came upon the cattle. To my surprise, it worked! It was a moment of ambivalence ... feeling a little foolish, but also rather smug at having taken charge of the situation and prevailed over these creatures.

The heating system in the school left much to be desired. It was just a stove with a metal jacket around the outside, called a "space heater". About the only space it heated was between its jacket and itself. One cold winter day, as my students and I suffered through yet another frigid day in our little schoolhouse, I thought, "Enough, it enough! It was terrible to have the students sitting there shivering so badly. How could we concentrate on learning while we were freezing to death! I sent them all home early that day. However I remained on duty, fully expecting to get some reaction to what I had done. It wasn't long before I spotted two men coming across the field toward the school house; it was the School Director and the Coast Guard Captain.

Upon their arrival, I invited them to sit and hear my explanation. After I was finished, and after they'd had the opportunity to sit for a few minutes where we sat all day, the agreed that the room was uncommonly cold, even though there was a good fire in the stove. I wasn't discharged, but was told that I could take a week's vacation ... while a new heater was installed. My students and I were quite comfortable for the remainder of the winter.

As time went on, I grew increasingly fond of South Manitou Island and my students. I continued teaching on the Island for two more years, even though an important reason for originally coming to the Island was gone. Lonzo had been transferred to the Coast Guard station at Sleeping Bear. During my second teaching season on the Island, the weather was quite severe. The temperatures were below zero much of the time, and the lake was completely frozen over. The mail boat could not get through, and a Coast Guard cutter had to make it's way as best they could into the Island to bring supplies. One Friday afternoon, after I'd dismissed my students for the week, I received a call from the mainland. It was Lonzo, who told me he was sending a plane over to take me to the mainland for the weekend! I told his younger brother about the dubious call and asked, "You believe that, Leon?"

"They're playing a joke on you!" smiled Leon. "No plane has ever come to the Island." But then he said, "Listen ... I hear a plane!" So we both rushed over to the Coast Guard Station where the plane had landed on the ice. Others had rushed down there too, to see what was going on. I was soon on my way to the mainland! After that, the same pilot flew his plane to the Island many times, bringing the first class mail and sometimes taking others who had to go to the mainland. The ice was no longer a barrier to winter travel to the mainland, but instead became our airport.

Yes, those were enjoyable years ... my three years of teaching on the Island. What a wonderful place to teach, with nature right at your doorstep - the many beautiful trees, the wild flowers, the farmland, all surrounded by the beauty of Lake Michigan. My three years as the Island's young schoolteacher will forever have a special place in my heart. What was lacking in wages was more than made up for by what I gained valuable experience, wonderful memories, and ...

... a husband.

(Rewritten from the original draft by son Gene L Warner)